

## **Solano County Animal Care Services**

### **2006-2007 Solano County Grand Jury**

#### **Reason for Investigation**

Under the authority of the California Penal Code Section 925, the 2006-2007 Grand Jury investigated Solano County Animal Care Services. Subsequent to commencing its investigation, the Grand Jury received a complaint regarding the operations of the County's Animal Shelter. The Grand Jury included this complaint in this investigation.

#### **Grand Jury Actions**

- Toured the County Animal Shelter
- Interviewed County Animal Care Services Manager
- Interviewed County Animal Shelter staff
- Interviewed complainant
- Interviewed two contract veterinarians
- Interviewed the chairman of the Solano County Animal Care Advisory Commission
- Reviewed the "Hayden Bill" (Stats. 1998, ch. 752)
- Reviewed California Code of Regulations, Title 16, Division 20, Section 2030-2032.5 (California Veterinary Medical Board)
- Reviewed Animal Care Services Fiscal Year 2006-2007 budget
- Reviewed contracts between Animal Care Services and all service providers
- Reviewed Memorandum of Understanding between all cities in Solano County and the County for the Animal Shelter
- Reviewed Animal Care Services policy and procedure manuals and standing orders for medical protocols

#### **Background/Summary**

Solano County Animal Care Services ("Animal Services") is a division of the Solano County General Services Department. Animal Services is responsible for providing all animal care and control activities for the unincorporated areas of Solano County and rabies control and sheltering services for both the incorporated and unincorporated areas of the County. This includes: 1) being the advocate for the humane treatment of animals; 2) enforcement of the laws and regulations to protect both the public and the animal population in the County; 3) operation of a countywide animal shelter; 4) administration of various programs to promote the care and well-being of animals; and 5) providing services in the best interest of both the human and animal population of the County.

The budget for Animal Services in Fiscal Year 2006-2007 is \$2,090,979, down 5 percent from the Fiscal Year 2005-2006 adopted budget. Animal Services receives revenues from licenses, permits, fees for services to animal owners and revenue for services provided to cities in the County. Fiscal Year 2006-2007 projected revenues are \$1,287,455. Approximately 38 percent of the budget for Animal Services is funded by the County.

Each city in the County enforces its own animal code regulations. The City of Vallejo contracts with the Benicia/Vallejo Humane Society, a non-profit agency, to provide animal control and shelter for lost or stray animals. The Humane Society keeps adoptable animals at its facility in Vallejo. However, many of the animals deemed as not fit for adoption are transferred to the County Shelter in Fairfield. The City of Benicia has assigned animal control responsibilities to the Benicia Police Department. The Department maintains a small holding facility for animals. The cities of Dixon, Fairfield, Rio Vista, Suisun City and Vacaville contract with Humane Animal Services (HAS), a non-profit corporation based in Vacaville, to provide animal control services. HAS does not maintain a shelter facility and takes all stray animals to the County Shelter.

The Solano County Animal Shelter (the Shelter) is located at 2510 Claybank Road, next to the Claybank Detention Facility, in Fairfield. Under terms of a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between the County and the cities, the County operates the Shelter and provides for the sheltering, feeding, and medical treatment of animals brought into the Shelter until they are either retrieved by the owners, adopted, accepted by a rescue group or destroyed. The Shelter is required to operate according to California law, commonly referred to as the "Hayden Bill," with respect to prompt veterinary care, nutrition and shelter. The law prescribes the number of days a stray animal must be held at a shelter prior to being placed for adoption or destroyed. It requires the release of animals to rescue and adoption groups, if requested, prior to being destroyed. The law also requires detailed record keeping be maintained with respect to intake, adoption, and destruction.

The MOU sets out a detailed cost-sharing of Animal Services between the County and the cities based upon the intake of animals from each jurisdiction. It states that the Shelter needs to be replaced, refurbished or additional facilities added. The MOU requires the parties to meet and discuss substantially refurbishing, replacing, or constructing an additional shelter.

The Shelter staff provided information for Fiscal Year 2005-2006. The Shelter received 8,753 animals - 3,194 dogs, 5,165 cats and 394 other animals. Only 835 of these animals were either picked up or turned in by residents from the unincorporated areas of the County. The remainder of the animals came from each of the cities in the County. During the same period, 1,097 animals were redeemed by owners, 1,176 were adopted, 333 were released, 155 were rescued by a specific rescue group, 5,835 were destroyed and 190 died by other means. Cats make up approximately 60 percent of the animals taken in at the Shelter and approximately 75 percent of the animals destroyed. The majority of dogs taken in at the Shelter are pit bulls and pit bull mixed breeds.

Due to the size and design of the Shelter, contamination and spread of infectious diseases from sick to healthy animals is difficult to contain. At times, overcrowding requires that some animals be destroyed that might otherwise be held until adopted or rescued. There are no outside runs or inside/outside runs that are connected for easy cleaning of the dog cages. The ventilation system is inadequate and upgrading other functions of the Shelter is problematic due to the size and design of the Shelter.

During its investigation, the Grand Jury learned of discussions within various departments of the County for locating a new shelter in close proximity to the County Detention Facility. The cities and the County acknowledge that a new or expanded shelter is needed. A plan to have a new facility is in its infancy and is probably a minimum of 10 years before it becomes a reality.

On January 18, 2007, members of the Grand Jury toured the Shelter. The jurors observed the office, visitor area, surgery, kennels, cat cages and the grounds of the facility. Staff, volunteers and inmates from the Sheriff's facility were observed performing their various duties. Veterinary medical staff appeared to be able to perform their duties despite the small surgery area. Due to the lay-out and the space available, there is a fair amount of foot traffic through the medical treatment room.

A recent citizen complaint to the California Veterinary Medical Board resulted in an inspection and evaluation of the veterinary facility and its operations at the shelter. The Board determined that the Shelter operation was not in violation of regulations. The Board found that they were not in violation of the original complaint, but several other violations were noted.

The entire Animal Services staff is located at the Shelter. Budgeted staffing includes: one animal care services manager, one assistant manager, one registered veterinary technician/kennel supervisor, four kennel specialists, three animal control officers, four clerical employees and one part-time contract veterinarian. A number of positions are or have been vacant for various periods of time. Several staff members have been in their positions for short periods of time. The assistant manager position is a new position which was filled in October 2006. There is a history of contract veterinarians leaving after short periods of time.

County animal control officers are trained and licensed in procedures for handling animals, which may be lost, stray, injured, or dangerous. The County animal control officers are responsible for patrolling the unincorporated areas of the County. With respect to responding to rabies control, they are responsible for the entire County. While Animal Services has a budget for three animal control officers, one position has been vacant for almost one year. The Grand Jury learned during its investigation that plans are underway to transfer County animal control officers from Animal Services to the Sheriff's Department. This transfer is expected to occur in July 2007.

Animal Services uses a specialized database computer program, called "Chameleon", to maintain all information on intake, processing, and treatment of animals at the Shelter. Animal Services paid \$4,500 for staff training on this program. However, due to staff turnover and various options for entering data into the system, it appears that not all personnel are sufficiently trained or consistent in how they enter data. This has resulted in some confusion and loss of time in treating and placing animals.

The Grand Jury learned during its investigation that Shelter staff was doing an adequate job based on resources. In the past, staffing shortages resulted in delays in processing animals, which caused them to remain longer at the Shelter. The high level of contract veterinarian turnover was partially blamed on inadequate space, lack of staffing, bureaucracy and funding issues at the expense of animal care.

Veterinarian services at the Shelter are provided through contracts for part-time veterinarians. The current contract for veterinary care provides for an amount not to exceed \$600 per day or \$49,000 per year. The veterinarians, as well as the surgery and treatment facilities located at the Shelter, must comply with the regulations of the Veterinary Medical Board, Sections 2030-2032.5, Title 16 of the California Code of Regulations (Minimum Standards of Practice).

Presently one part-time contract veterinarian provides medical care and performs surgery as needed at the Shelter. This veterinarian works approximately two days per week performing surgeries and providing medical care. The veterinarian also operates the low-cost vaccination clinic. Since all animals must be spayed or neutered prior to adoption, approximately 75 percent of the veterinarian's time is spent performing spay and neuter surgeries.

The contract veterinarian establishes treatment protocols to be followed by staff in his absence. Animals in need of treatment are sent to private veterinary hospitals when there is a medical emergency and the contract veterinarian is off duty. There are no discounts for treatment. The budget for outside veterinarian services is limited and appears to be used sparingly. The Grand Jury was informed that at times animals have been left untreated because no veterinarian was on duty.

Animal Services contracts with the Solano County Sheriff's Department for jail inmates, supervised by a correctional officer, to feed the animals, clean their cages and perform various custodial tasks at the Shelter. The Inmate Cleaning Program costs Animal Services approximately \$106,000 a year. Inmates are given time off of their sentences for days worked. Four to six inmates work seven days a week from approximately 7:30 a.m. to 2:00 p.m.

Shelter staff interactions with inmates, including training and information sharing regarding the animals, are required to go through the correctional officer. This procedure is not always followed and is not necessarily the most effective means of communicating the best care for the animals. There have also been some instances of animal abuse by inmates. Some female volunteers have reported that some inmates have made disparaging verbal remarks to them. This has resulted in curtailed volunteer participation at the Shelter.

Animal Services and the Sheriff's Department have collaborated on a Kitten Foster Care Program. Minimum security female inmates feed and care for kittens at the Claybank Detention Facility until the kittens are old enough to eat on their own and old enough for adoption. Without this program, many more kittens would need to be destroyed.

One of the stated goals of Animal Services is to find good homes for all adoptable animals not redeemed by their owners. Animals that have met the holding period required under the Hayden Bill and deemed to be adoptable are displayed in cages in a location available for members of the public to tour. In addition, the Shelter has agreements with volunteer organizations to display adoptable animals to the public in pet stores, shopping centers, and other places of public gathering. Animal Services contracts with a company to post adoptable pets on websites such as [www.petfinder.com](http://www.petfinder.com) and [www.petharbor.com](http://www.petharbor.com).

Animal Services requires that before an adopted animal leaves the Shelter, it be spayed or neutered and implanted with a microchip so it can be easily reunited with its owner if it becomes lost.

The Shelter has limited space for housing animals eligible for adoption, with only 21 cages dedicated for cats and 36 for dogs. Animal Services work with volunteers, who provide foster care and temporary homes for adoptable animals.

Before being made available for adoption, Animal Services requires that all animals be evaluated by Shelter staff to determine if the animal is socialized and in good physical condition and to ensure the animal is not aggressive. Animal Services has a policy and procedure manual regarding evaluation of animals and takes a cautious approach when determining whether or not an animal is “social.”

Animals deemed by Shelter staff as not suitable for adoption are evaluated as to eligibility for rescue. Attempts are made to place them with nonprofit rescue organizations to find suitable homes for the animals. Based on evaluation testing, animals can be put up for adoption, sent to a rescue organization or destroyed.

The placement of animals with rescue organizations is not formalized. It appears to be based upon individual staff members’ connection to rescue groups and particular breed preferences. When a rescue group offers to take an animal, it is held by the Shelter for as long as possible awaiting someone from the rescue group to claim the animal.

In Fiscal Year 2005-2006, there were 5,835 animals destroyed at the Shelter. Kennel staff required to destroy animals on a regular basis, finds this part of the job emotionally draining.

Animal Services initiated several outreach programs. Adopted dogs and their owners are offered obedience training classes. The Shelter holds low cost vaccination clinics one day each month. Microchipping of pets is offered to assist pet owners with a comprehensive recovery method for lost pets.

Animal Services works with many volunteer and rescue groups. Recently, the Volunteer Program has been given more emphasis. Volunteers provide a wide array of services. These include socializing dogs and cats, walking the dogs, in addition to providing foster care and adoption support services.

## **Findings and Recommendations**

**Finding 1** - The present policy of contracting for veterinarian services approximately 20 hours a week does not seem to meet the requirements of the “Hayden Bill” (Stats. 1998, ch. 752), which requires prompt veterinary care of animals housed at shelters

**Recommendation 1** - Animal Care Services should hire a full time staff veterinarian.

**Finding 2** - The County plans on transferring animal control officers from Animal Care Services to the Sheriff’s Department.

**Recommendation 2** - The County should not transfer animal control officers to the Sheriff's Department without first soliciting public input and input from the Solano County Animal Care Commission.

**Finding 3** - The County has been slow to fill vacant positions in Animal Care Services.

**Recommendation 3** - The County should fill vacancies as expeditiously as possible.

**Finding 4** - The Animal Shelter uses a checklist for evaluating the temperament of dogs and cats. However, the policy regarding how a determination is made as to whether an animal is adoptable or should be destroyed is not well defined. It appears to be subjective depending on the evaluator.

**Recommendation 4** - Shelter policies and procedures should be reinforced and performed in a consistent manner. The determination of when an animal is not adoptable should be better defined. Shelter management should modify its procedures to include an evaluation by a second person in those cases when the initial evaluator determines an animal is not adoptable.

**Finding 5** - Animal Services staff attempts to place animals not deemed adoptable with rescue groups; however, there is no structured program.

**Recommendation 5** - Animal Services management should develop a more formalized program for the placement of animals with rescue groups.

**Finding 6** - The Shelter, located next to the Claybank Detention Facility, is inadequate in size and design. Staff from Animal Services and the Sheriff's Department are in discussions regarding the location of a new shelter and have been looking at sites in close proximity to the jail.

**Recommendation 6a** - Building a new shelter should become a high priority for the County and its cities. As stated in the Memorandum of Understanding the parties, should begin meeting and come up with a viable location, design and funding for a new shelter.

**Recommendation 6b** - The location of a new shelter should be in the best interest of the animals and the residents of Solano County. It is not necessary to assume close proximity to the Claybank Detention Center.

**Finding 7** - The Inmate Cleaning Program has resulted in: 1) reported abuse of the animals; 2) negative inmate interactions, which limits expansion of the Volunteer Program and other outreach programs; and 3) deterring residents interested in adopting animals from considering animals housed at the Shelter.

**Recommendation 7** - The County should consider discontinuing this program and hire additional Animal Services staff to provide these services.

**Finding 8** - The Kitten Foster Care Program, utilizing female inmates of the County Detention Facility, has proven to be successful for both the animals and the inmates.

**Recommendation 8** - Animal Care Services and the Sheriff's Department should be commended on this successful and creative program and are encouraged to promote and continue this program.

**Finding 9** - Animal Care Services is underfunded. Earlier budget increases have been minimal and in Fiscal Year 2006-2007 the budget was decreased 5 percent from the Fiscal Year 2005-2006 budget.

**Recommendation 9** - The County should evaluate the Animal Care Services budget to provide for, at minimum: 1) a full time veterinarian; 2) replacement of the Inmate Cleaning Program with additional animal services staff that can perform multiple functions; 3) expansion and promotion of programs that benefit the well-being of the animals at the Shelter; and 4) education and promotion of population control of animals within the County.

### **Affected Agencies**

- Solano County Animal Care Services
- Solano County Department of General Services
- Solano County Board of Supervisors
- Solano County Administrator
- Solano County Sheriff's Department
- City Manager/Administrator, Benicia
- City Manager/Administrator, Dixon
- City Manager/Administrator, Fairfield
- City Manager/Administrator, Rio Vista
- City Manager/Administrator, Suisun City
- City Manager/Administrator, Vallejo
- City Manager/Administrator, Vacaville

### **Courtesy Copy**

Solano County Animal Care Commission